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Mineral King: Next Move Is Up To Sierra Club

By James Foley
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VISALIA — Statewide attention was focused onTulare County yesterday when Walt Disney Productions unveiled a new concept on the proposed development of Mineral King bowl.

Tomorrow the spotlight shifts to San Francisco where directors of the conservationist Sierra Club will hold a top echelon meeting to decide what the club's next move will be—if any.

Should the directors elect to continue opposition to creating an all-year recreational spa by Disney in Mineral King they will have until May 15 to amend an original complaint which the US Supreme Court denied 4-3 April 19. At that time the high court ruled the Sierra Club had no standing to sue but declined to go into the merits of the case.

Disney and local officials now hope that with the new concept outlined yesterday at a press conference in the Tulare County Courthouse, it may remove many of the earlier Sierra Club objections. At least enough that the Sierra Club will feel satisfied and not start the whole process anew in the lower courts.

Some of the feeling of optimism is reflected in the new approach to Mineral King access with a publicly-owned, cog-assisted railroad from Oak Flat Grove to Mineral King Valley, a distance of about 14 miles.

E. Cardon Walker, president of Walt Disney Productions, feels this concept could remove major objections on the part of the Sierra Club and other conservation groups.

The railway would preserve the Redwoods, prevent ugly road scars, keep noxious vehicle fumes away from the valley and, most important, aid in restricting the number of visitors.

Walker envisions the need of about 10 trains with a capacity of 300 people at a cost of about $23 million. Round-trip costs would be from $3 to $4 and, hopefully, children free.

Financing was barely touched upon, but Walker appeared definite the county or some other governmental agency would have to issue bonds.

Details of this have not been worked out—or at least made public. General obligation bonds would require a two-thirds vote of Tulare County residents It is als conceivable the county could issue revenue bonds.

Disney's plan is to make the cog-assisted railway nonprofit with money earned used to pay off the bonds over a 30 year period, the life of the US Forest Service permit.

Walker said by limiting the number of visitors it also permits Disney to scale down its facilities in Mineral King. There would be from 7 to 10 ski lifts and from $15 to $18 million invested in housing, restaurant facilities and other needed structures.

The price would be competitive by necessity because the Forest Service controls this, he added.

Service and utility lines would be under the railway tracks, and waste disposal would be no problem. Walker described the sewage system in the Disney project in Florida as excellent, and indicated it would be a prototype for Mineral King.

Horace M. Albright, former director of the National Parks Service and a member of the conservation advisory committee for Disney, heartily endorsed the entire plan. Mineral King, despite what others say, it not a "wilderness" as defined in the Wilderness Act. It is a gateway to a wilderness area.

"But," he added, "it must be handled very carefully and it must be controlled. I believe that Disney and the Forest Service are proceeding on the right line. But you can't settle the issue on the theory that it's a wilderness area."

Willy Schaeffler, one of the world's foremost skiers and a consultant for Disney, said he has visited more than 120 ski areas worldwide. Yet he has no reason to change his ideas of proper development of Mineral King as a ski area.

Douglas Leisz, regional forester for the National Forest Service, wholeheartedly endorsed the new concept.

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